

My Life in Music: Interview with Wasanti Paranjape

Conducted by Rob Wallace, September 5, 2010.

Transcription by Elizabeth Johnstone and Paul Watkins with contributions from Rob Wallace and Justin Scarimbolo.

[Note: the following interview is helpfully supplemented by Mrs. Paranjape's piece, *Khyal, Improvisation, and Social Change*, from *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, Vol 8, No 1 (2012). Many of the issues discussed below are also described on the Virtual Museum of Canadian Traditional Music website featuring Mrs. Paranjape: <http://www.fwalive.ualberta.ca/vmctm/en/html/narratives.php?id=1&sec=0>. For an ethnomusicological account of the *khyal* style, the reader is directed towards Bonnie Wade's *Khyal: Creativity Within North India's Classical Music Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985). –Rob Wallace]

RW: It is my great pleasure to be here interviewing Mrs. Wasanti Paranjape. Wasanti is a very wonderful vocalist who lives in Guelph, and we are here interviewing you as a supplement to the paper that you've written for the *Critical Studies in Improvisation* journal. So we will just be talking for a little bit about your life in music.

WP: My life in music... As a little girl my mother gave us all the tunes, and she sang with us. She was a very classical singer, an artist, and she would always have a music master come to our house so everyone, all our brothers and sisters, learned some *tabla*, or singing, or harmonium, or sitar, whatever they'd choose they would like to play or sing. In this way, I started.

But in the school we had an option, whether we could take music or not. So I said, "yes, I would like to take music for my Matriculation examination." And there I took music and passed with a very nice grade, but after that I didn't study music. I went to Benares to study science. And then after that I changed [all my line] and I went to law in Pune, and there also I took some elocution from the local person. But when I came back and completed my law degree, when I came back to my hometown, I started studying music very seriously. And then I took the *Visharad* degree that is equivalent to the bachelor's degree. Because you've passed examinations you begin to study the music very seriously, and that's how I got involved in music. But then I got married and I came abroad. So I had all those Bhatkhande volumes and the tapes and from that I kept my music alive.

RW: Tell us about Bhatkhande and how his legacy has influenced Indian classical music.

WP: You see, Bhatkhande was a lawyer from India, from Bombay, and he was very much interested in music. When India got its independence there was a lot of strife between Muslims and Hindus, but Bhatkhande reconciled with each and every family. He traveled all over India, went to different families and told them, "If you don't give me your music, your *gats*,¹ they will be just gone with you. Now I will bring them in book form so everyone will know about them." So they all shared their music with Bhatkhande, and Bhatkhande systematized orthodox Indian music. He wrote six volumes in which he notated all these songs that he collected from these

¹ A *gat* is one of the compositional forms in Hindustani classical music.

families that we call *gharanas* [musical lineages]. They write now such standard books that they are at every university. For the degree they are the text books for the course. He left his law practice and started doing music. And in this way he really helped Indian classical music because it was not all that notated like that. It was from *guru* [teacher] to the *shishya* [student] just oral. And now it has been written, so anybody who is interested in music can go to those volumes and get it. So, it was a very critical service to classical music, yes.

RW: Now when you started out, you mentioned the *gharana*, and “ghar” literally means “house,” yes?

WP: Hm hmm.

RW: And so you learned in the house, in your own house, but not from an *Ustad* or a *Pandit*,² you learned from your mother.

WP: But I went to a small music school in my city, and they belong to Bharat Gayan Samaj. That is an honorable institution in music which is proliferant in my province. And they have a course, and they take the examinations and things like that. And with this master, I mean the person in the school, he would guide me also...how to learn all kinds of songs and, you know, *talas* [rhythmic structures] and different ways to improvise, how to improvise all these things. So at least I got some encouragement there, and from that, then there is this Vinayak Bhau Patwardhan. He’s a very, very ...now he’s no more, but he was a very eminent musician in our province. He took my examination, and he gave me that degree. So it was very nice that I could learn from this. Then, I also went for the....there is another Lucknow examinations. So I went for them too, and I studied for that, and there is a center in Nagpur, which is away from my city, and I went there and I appeared for the exams and passed those too. So, I got the idea that what this school makes, how they make the music and the other school—what are the differences? So I learned both things. These *gharanas* are very important. When India got independence there were lots of states, and some of the states would support musicians. Many good people like scientists and artists. Musicians were also supported by these states. Each state ...these musicians hired a family, their students and their family, and they would start singing. But at that time there was not so much traveling from one place to another, so they had their own way of improvisation, their own way of singing. So there are sixteen prominent *gharanas*, and their styles are distinctively different from one to another, though they are singing the same *raga* and the same songs. But they are very ...if you listen to them you will know the difference. Like that, there were *gharanas*. So there are many, many *gharanas*. I may belong to *Kirana Gharana*, the way I sing, which is like Bhimsen Joshi, and all these people sing.

RW: Can you tell us a little bit about the style of Indian classical music that you’re involved in, this vocal style, *khyal*.

WP: Well, some of them, they have their own typical styles of *tans*. *Tans* are the improvised fashion of very fast singing. And they have their own special way of those *tans*. Now some of them will have the improvisation very slowly started, and they will not want to go over the song

² “Ustad” and “Pandit” are honorific terms applied respectively to master Muslim and Hindu musicians.

or change, and give their ideas how they want to do the improvisation. So in this way, each gharana has its own way of improvisation. Though, there are rules how the raga is to be sung. Yet, because these people have made the styles, they become different.

RW: And khyal literally means “imagination,” yes?

WP: Well, khyal is an art form. It is a cultural, intercultural genre of North Indian classical music. Now, previous to khyal there were two different musical cultures: North Indian classical music, which was very orthodox, and they had the genre of *dhrupad*. Now, at that time India was ruled by the Muslims. So there were quite a bit of Muslims who were interested in Indian classical music and who were very good musicians. Like at the *darbar* [court] of Akbar Badshah at Delhi. Miyan Tansen was a very, very beautiful and a very knowledgeable person. And he originally was a Hindu Brahmin and he was converted to Islam. So like that, most people who are from, who originated from Indian culture have gone to the Islamic culture. Now in the Islamic culture, there was a genre called *qawwali*. So prior to khyal there was orthodox Hindu singing that is called the *dhrupad*, and the Muslim music culture had a *qawwali*. Now with the *dhrupad*, it has to be sung in a particular way. There was a little improvisation they could do in the beginning but they cannot change the style. They had to give the rhythm and do the things as it is told. So most of the musicians got very frustrated, and they wanted some change, but they did not know how to go about it. This happened around the thirteenth century. But after that, around 1400, there was a king who was also very ... Muhammad Shah Sharqui ... he also wanted to have a change. And he learned Indian classical music. So, on one occasion he invaded another Hindu kingdom from Kara, and that Hindu king requested, he said: “Look, my son is very interested in music and he has arranged a musical conference, so would you not please invade us. And keep us calm.” And he said, “Yes. On one condition. Your son should become a Muslim.” So he said, “Okay, I will become Muslim.” Then at this conference there was a first idea that some kind of form should be formed and these musicians were talking about it. Then, around 1700 there is at the Muhammad Shah court, in Delhi, there were Sadarang and Adarang [Niyamat Khan and Firoz Khan]. This was what we call *vaggeyakara*. That is, very eminent classical musicians. Now this Sadarang was a direct descendant of Tansen; his daughter’s son. And Adarang was another good musician. And they created hundreds of khyals, and they taught these khyals to their students. But Sadarang and Adarang were very loyal to the *dhrupad*, the original style, so they sang only that. But then disciples sang the other khyals and these khyals we are singing right now. So it has gone like that. So the khyal, it is an intercultural genre that is formed in North Indian classical music, but it has the freedom of the Muslim way of thinking. Still, it keeps the very, very typical North Indian style, and we say it has not changed the soul of Indian classical music, yet it has given [the real] freedom, which it needed. And it was a compromise between the two cultures. They said, “Yes, we will try and we will relax the rules that were so orthodox in the beginning.” And that’s how Indian music has changed. And this khyal has a salutary effect on Indian classical music, and it is still being sung right now. So from 1700 to 1900 it has really gone into the public and from 1900 until now we are singing the same things.

RW: In your paper discussing this history you also talk about the role of women in this style of singing. Do you have some things you’d like to tell us about that, your perspective on that?

WP: Well, I told you about the stage where the musicians were supported. Now, at the court these musicians would teach the womenfolk to sing and dance, and these girls would entertain the royal court. So this was the fashion. So these girls have learned their *khyals* and *thumris*, and all kinds of forms that were available. So these girls were professional women who would entertain the royal court. And so there is another kind of class of women who are called *devadasis*. And these devadasis used to sing and dance at the temples. And they were supported by their patrons in that state. Now as the British have come, they thought that this is very degrading for the women to perform for the people. So they convinced the patrons not to support these women and so these women they did not know how to find their living. So they went to the rich people. Some of them became prostitutes or something like that. But they really [...] because there was a dance system called Bharatanatyam, which is a very, very stylish kind of dance, and that also deteriorated because these women could not dance at the temple. Now these women, then they thought that we have to do something. So in my province, that is Maharashtra, around Bombay, these professional women said, “No, we are not going to do the dancing. We will sing.” And they performed in the public and because of their method of singing people really liked that very much. And they became professional singers in the eyes of the [public]. now these women are of the lower caste. I can tell you one story of Gangubai Hungal, who is no more now but she was a very good musician. And when she was a young girl she went to the Brahmin colony and stole some mangoes. And she was caught. So she said, “I am sorry.” But they said, “No, don’t come to this area again. Go now.” But as Gangubai Hungal became an artist and publicly performed, now the same families are inviting her to their houses and giving her dinner and saying, “Come.” So in this way these professional women really earn public respect. But then there were other women in the public who also could sing the same way, and they did not know how to go into the public to get a performance. But they, with the social reform, somehow managed. I can tell you that these women also got an opportunity and they performed in concerts. Ordinarily it was only the male Brahmins who could sing and make concerts. But now with this gender equality, women can also perform. Another thing is intercultural marriages. That happened because of this khyal. I told you that Ali Akbar Khan and now Ravi Shankar used to stay together. Ali Akbar Khan, [and] Zakir Hussain’s father [Alla Rakha]. These people stayed together. Though there was turmoil around Pakistan and India, they quietly studied music and gave instructions to people. It has happened that Ravi Shankar did marry Ali Akbar Khan’s sister. So such intercultural marriages ...I mean, right in the beginning happened. Right in the beginning, Badshah Akbar—I told you about Tansen with him—he also married a Hindu princess and later lived according to her own religion. He did not force her to Islam. But he did it just to make people think Muslim and Hindu can stay together. Now there are quite a few like Parwin Sultana. She is an artist from Afghanistan, and she married a Hindu person. So like that, these marriages are accepted in the society, and so we can see that these musicians helped create a change in society. Then, there is another thing the music has done. You see, it was really a very orthodox Hindu way of singing. So the Brahmins would perform. But now anybody can perform, and anybody can learn the music. For example, my brother got sitar instructions from a person who was a janitor in the hospital. So because that janitor knew his art, so my brother, though he is a Brahmin, he would learn from him because knowledge and erudition is very respected in India, whether it comes from the Brahmin or any other person. Also, there is Firoz Dastur, who is a Parsi, and he sings really, really well, so he performs. And anybody, whether caste, class [can perform]—any distinction under Indian

classical music has disappeared and people begin to learn from each other rather than just make barriers and not listen to each other.

India was invented by many, many people, particularly people from Iran, people from Iraq. All these people came. And they listened to Indian classical music and they were interested in it. Also, they gave their idea of music to us so the musicians were listening to them as well as keeping their own. In this way the North Indian classical music is above race, religion, class, caste, or gender. It has really created a great liberalism in the minds of the musicians, and also it generated in the society—so now in India you find that Hindu and Muslims can marry each other and there is not so much trouble around that fact. These are the things I would like to tell you about the social change in Indian classical music. [The blend of Muslim culture with Hindu culture] really allows you to do all kinds of improvisation. It allows you to be free to do whatever you want to do and this was not allowed at all in the beginning. So this liberalism has really benefitted Indian classical music. And it has come from the Muslim culture. It's a blend. They just got together and did whatever they could do. Like Abdul Karim Khan, he was such a good musician. At that time the Hindu people would not let him go to the temple, though he wanted to go to the temple. But he would sit in the courtyard of the temple and sing all the *bhajans*, all the devotional songs. Now some of the tunes that he has created, I sing them. So like that we interchange each other's ideas and it has benefitted Indian classical music.

RW: How have some of these things you've been discussing influenced your own personal experience with music?

WP: My personal experience ... I came abroad here ... I taught music as much as possible. But then there was one friend, Regula Qureshi. She married a Muslim and she went to Pakistan and she was playing cello here, at the symphony. She took this *sarangi*, playing sarangi, but with the Western music you do not blend one note to the other. And she was just, you know, staccato. Like that [her right hand jumps up and down] she was playing Indian classical music. And when she heard me singing she said, "May I come to you." And she would come and accompany me. In the beginning she was not able to play in the tune even, but later on, with perseverance—and she went to Bombay and learned from there too—and she has really done well with the Indian classical music. Now, with her help I could start ethnomusicology at the University of Alberta. So we had singing, as well as sitar playing, and tabla, all these three sections. All kinds of people would come: Chinese, French, and English, and our own, and Pakistanis also. But Regula is a Christian. She married a Muslim. I am a Hindu. But the music, it binds us together. It adds to one's knowledge and one's career, too. She helped me. I helped her. In this way, things happened. She now is doing this work you call ... you have that....

RW: [looks at notes] Virtual Museum...

WP: Virtual Museum of Traditional Canadian Music.
[see <http://www.fwalive.ualberta.ca/vmctm/en/html/index.php?>]. And she represents Asiatic, South Asian music and she has me represent that. We, each of us, really help to try to make music. I teach anyone who comes to me. It doesn't matter to me [who they are]. Western girls also used to come to me, who were doing jazz. And they said, "How do you improvise?"

[Laughs] I will tell you in my own system how to improvise, but I don't know how to go to jazz in that way. But they would come to me and I would help them. So, my life is like that.

RW: So what are you doing with your vocal technique now? How are you using music now in your life?

WP: Well, often I give concerts here at this university [Guelph]. I have so far given two concerts. Maybe if there is a slot open, maybe this year also I might do some work. But in Toronto there is a lot of music. And people really know and understand music. They also bring a lot of artists from India and they have programs in which I go and sing sometimes. I have just come here, and I don't know the people around here, but I will slowly go and proliferate and do something with my music. Right now I'm not having students. I want to get established first and then I'll have students.

RW: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your music or the history?

WP: Just that I thought I'll go to jazz because jazz is improvisation. And I thought... we have so many ragas and so many different ways, so why not go in that area and find out if I could do something there. And that's how I went to jazz: to listen. Now I have to learn more of Western music to get to know jazz properly. But I will learn. Maybe people like you will help me.

RW: Well I would like to thank you for helping us to understand some of these issues and blessing us with your knowledge and your art. Thank you very much, Wasanti.

WP: Well thank you very much for giving me this opportunity to tell about my story, and thanks again.

[The interview concludes with a performance. Paranjape is tuning the tampoora and Wallace is tuning the tabla from 33:05-39:10 in case the viewer would like to skip ahead.]